



## BOOK REVIEW

# Christina Weis (2021). *Surrogacy in Russia: An Ethnography of Reproductive Labour, Stratification and Migration*. Emerald

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Despite the increased use of surrogacy as a fertility treatment method in Russia, this technology continues to generate controversies and heated public debates. Russian and international scholars examine legal, medical, and media discourses on surrogate motherhood in Russia, as well as online representations of surrogacy on the Internet forums and in social media (Nartova, 2009; Rivkin-Fish, 2013; Siegl, 2018). However, academic literature has so far analyzed surrogate motherhood in Russia in a limited scope and format, such as book chapters and articles on particular aspects of this phenomenon. The book under review is the first monograph devoted to the institute of surrogacy in Russia in its complexity and breadth. The book's author, Christina Weis, is a social and cultural anthropologist and a Lecturer at De Montfort University (Leicester, UK). She based her book on extensive ethnographic research conducted from 2011 to 2021 among surrogate mothers, commissioning parents, fertility clinics, and surrogacy agencies in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Karelia, and Minsk. The book explores “the social organization and cultural framing of commercial gestational surrogacy in Russia” (p. 3) in the context of global surrogacy practices and institutions.

The book opens with a Prologue, in which the reader meets Gabriela, a woman from Moldova who came to St. Petersburg to offer her services as a surrogate mother to a Russian couple. The author describes how she first met Gabriela in person on a cold evening in a working-class neighborhood of St. Petersburg. Having agreed to talk about her experience, Gabriela, to the author's surprise, declined her invitation to sit in a warm café, preferring walking on icy streets. As it turns out, her contract with a surrogate agency, which she resorted to after failed attempts to find client parents on her own, forbade her to talk about

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her circumstances. “I don’t have any rights. The parents have all the advantages, and I have none,” Gabriela explains to the author. Thus begins Weis’ observant and thoughtful exploration of surrogate motherhood in Russia. Weis uses Gabriela’s story as a device to move along her analysis of social and cultural practices and institutions underlying commercial surrogacy in Russia. The book has five chapters, which are “Introduction: Surrogacy in Russia,” “Becoming a Surrogacy Worker,” “Making the Relationship Work,” “Reproductive Migrations,” “Disruptions and Reconfigurations”, in addition to a conclusion, “At Crossroads,” and four Appendixes.

Chapter 1 situates surrogacy in Russia within the larger context of surrogacy practices worldwide. After a brief survey of the legal frameworks in which the surrogacy market operates in Russia and the body of international scholarship on surrogacy, the author argues that the common tropes of transnational surrogacy, “such as the North–South exploitation and brown bodies carrying white babies,” or “the framing of surrogacy as a labour of love” (p. 16) in Western countries do not capture how surrogate motherhood is seen and conceptualized in Russia and other former Soviet countries. Weis’ central argument in the book is that “in Russia, surrogacy is unapologetically seen as an economic transaction, or in the words of the surrogates, a ‘business arrangement’” (pp. 16–17). Indicating that gestational surrogacy mothers regard themselves as “workers,” Weis introduces the terms “surrogacy worker” to refer to women undertaking the role of surrogate mothers and “surrogacy work” to designate all types of labor involved in surrogacy.

The chapter describes the author’s research methodology, sampling, and specifics of recruiting informants for the study. The volume of collected data is impressive: Weis interviewed dozens of surrogate mothers, bio-parents, agency employees, and medical specialists conducting participant observation in “fertility clinics, maternity wards, gynaecological units, surrogacy agencies’ premises and in surrogacy workers’ homes and provided accommodation” (p. 17). The author is remarkably open about the difficulties she encountered when entering the field: the limitations imposed by the language barrier, the situational and time constraints, etc., and the way her position in the field influenced the data she acquired.

Chapter 2 describes how women enter the surrogacy market in Russia and outlines the social, economic, and educational characteristics of a typical surrogacy worker. Financial insecurity and the lack of well-paid employment constitute the key motivation for women to become a surrogate. “None of the women in my research sample would have opted for surrogacy work if their material situation had been better” (p. 30). The chapter also discusses the selection process of potential surrogates based on “various expectations and racialised imaginaries of the agencies and client parents: besides being healthy, a desirable surrogacy was expected to display docility, a certain amount of financial need and monetary rather than altruistic inclinations” (p. 53). The author explains that prospective surrogates are not recruited from the poorest social class since their lifestyle, eating, and sanitary habits have to meet the criteria of middle-class client parents.

The way Weis describes “surrogate work” falls into a broad framework of the neoliberal economy based on the exchange of various types of capital. Weis introduces

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the notion of “reproductive capital” to describe the business transactions taking place in surrogacy: “By engaging in surrogacy work and providing their uterus for surrogacy gestation, they [surrogate mothers] are able to convert their reproductive capital into economic capital” (p. 30). She further explores the neoliberal strategies of managing one’s self when discussing the necessity for surrogate workers to perform “emotion work,” i.e., “to continuously manage one’s own emotions” during the pregnancy, to justify their choice from the moral point of view and to maintain emotional detachment from the child they carry (p. 36). Weis shows that the intensive medicalization of surrogate pregnancies reinforces the emotional distance between the women and the babies they carry. Since surrogate pregnancy requires considerable medical intervention, many surrogate workers perceive their pregnancies as “entirely artificial” (p. 33).

Chapter 3 addresses the topic of the relationship between client parents and surrogacy workers. Depending on whether the parties enter into a direct agreement or choose to contact via a mediating surrogacy agency, they may meet or not meet in person during the surrogacy program. However, regardless of the arrangement, “surrogacy workers and client parents conceptualise their relationship in terms of a hierarchical ‘employee–employer’ relationship” (p. 57). The author acknowledges that the absolute majority of surrogate contracts do not grant surrogate workers the legal status, rights, and protection as “employees.” Nevertheless, framing surrogacy in terms of temporary employment is the choice of words by surrogate mothers and reflects their sense of identity and moral understanding of their roles. A corollary to the hierarchical relationship between the client parents and the surrogate worker is that the latter considers it her duty to establish and maintain a smooth relationship that satisfies her employers. Weis calls this type of work “relational work” (p. 65), which continues until the child is born. After childbirth, any relationship between the parties ends, in contrast to surrogacy arrangements in North America and some other Western countries, where surrogacy is framed as a “gift” and “labor of love.” US surrogacy workers “value a good personal relationship with their client parents during the pregnancy and expect a lasting bond thereafter” (p. 73). In Russia, surrogacy is ultimately understood “as a temporary, contractual arrangement and not as an opportunity to create life-long bonds” (p. 76).

Geographical and geopolitical stratification constitutes an essential aspect of commercial surrogacy in Russia. Chapter 4 examines “reproductive flows” from the country’s peripheral regions and former Soviet Union republics to Russia’s “repro-hubs,” Moscow and St. Petersburg. The book analyzes two forms of reproductive mobility: commuting and migration. The former is practiced by surrogate workers living not too far from the repro-hubs and involves visits to the cities for appointments and, eventually, for delivery. Women from remote places and other countries migrate to Russia’s capitals and stay there for the entire duration of the surrogacy program. Weis examines the stark disparities in financial compensation among women from St. Petersburg and Moscow, women from Russia’s periphery, and women arriving from outside Russia. Racialized imaginaries play a significant role in the geographically-stratified surrogacy market: led by stereotypes, most clients in Russia avoid hiring “ethnic” women. As a result, “women from Central Asian republics, who live in Russia and want to become surrogacy workers, tend to significantly lower their financial expectations to compete with Slavic women” (p. 49).

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Chapter 5 addresses the impact of the COVID-19 epidemics and the increasingly conservative political climate in the country on the practice of surrogacy in Russia, as well as the latest developments in the legislation on surrogate motherhood. The situation, in which, during the COVID lockdown, hundreds of children born to surrogates for international couples got stuck within the country's borders with the parents unable to pick them, was not uniquely Russian. In Russia, however, the COVID surrogacy crisis coincided with the shifting political and public attitudes toward surrogacy, as evidenced by the high-profile criminal case following the death, in January 2020, of an infant born to a surrogate mother for a Filipino couple. During the investigation, the authorities arrested employees of a surrogacy agency and a reproductive clinic, including three medical doctors. Drawing on the media coverage of the story, which, in my opinion, was sensationalistic rather than accurate, the author interprets this case as a “clampdown” on the current liberal surrogacy policy implemented by “conservative and homophobic politicians” (p. 111). Unfortunately, Weis overlooked the published comments by expert lawyers who, after a careful investigation into the case, concluded that the human trafficking charges filed against the surrogate agencies were not entirely unfounded and had little to do with the state homophobia.<sup>1</sup>

In her “Conclusion: At Crossroads”, Weis analyzes the draft bill introduced by the State Duma in 2021 that limited access to surrogacy to Russian citizens only, and wonders if Russia will follow the path already taken by India and Mexico toward prohibiting foreign nationals from entering commercial surrogacy agreements. After the book's publication, in December 2022, the State Duma passed a law that restricts access to this technology for foreigners and bans the use of donor oocytes and surrogacy in one procedure, thus eliminating a legal uncertainty, which surfaced in the criminal case of 2020. Although this latest development considerably narrows the path of surrogate motherhood in Russia, the main trends of the institution of surrogacy highlighted by the author such as conceptualizing surrogacy as a business arrangement and temporary employment for surrogacy workers, geographical and geopolitical stratification of surrogacy market resulting in commuting and migrant surrogacy will most probably continue in the coming years.

Appendixes 1–4 provide the readers with glimpses of the fieldwork behind the scenes: the list of research participants, fieldnotes on the scholar's relationship with the informants, a self-reflective piece about the emotional work embedded in doing anthropology, and a sketch of an agency-provided accommodation for surrogates on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. The author's devotion to the empirical data is the book's strong suit, yet, it does her a disservice at times. Given the speed of economic and social change, the author should have relinquished some of her data from 2014–2015 and made updates. For example, the amount of compensation for surrogacy pregnancy had doubled compared to what she cites in the Note on Conversion table on the first pages. Moreover, lawyer Svitnev's 2011 expert assessment of Russia as a “reproductive paradise” for foreigners (p. 8), cited in the opening pages of the book, sounds problematic

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Zinovieva, a medical lawyer and a member of Russian Association of Human Reproduction, provided a detailed examination of 11 episodes of the case that took place from 2014 to 2020 (for more details, see Granina, 2020).

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in 2021, when the author of the quote has been charged with human trafficking and is fleeing arrest in another country. The book cites the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) survey on surrogacy from 2013, but it fails to mention that the VCIOM repeated its study in 2021, and the latter showed the public's increased awareness and acceptance of surrogacy. Fortunately, such discrepancies between the realities of surrogacy circa 2015 and those in the year of the book's publication are not numerous, and they do not undermine the author's innovative and profound analysis.

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